United Nations E/CN.6/2012/NGO/56

Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
5 December 2011

Original: English

Commission on the Status of Women
Fifty-sixth session
27 February-9 March 2012
Item 3 (a) of the provisional agenda*
Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the special session of the General Assembly entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century": implementation of strategic objectives and action in critical areas of concern, and further actions and initiatives; priority theme: "The empowerment of rural women and their role in poverty and hunger eradication, development and current challenges"

Statement submitted by Stichting Rutgers WPF, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* E/CN.6/2012/1.

11-62091 (E) 100112

Please recycle

Statement

Pakistan ranks as one of the poorest and most populous countries in the world, with an estimated population of 180 million. The cycle of poverty is exacerbated by high rates of illiteracy, unemployment and ill health, particularly among women and adolescents. Pakistan is a conservative and patriarchal society where women and girls — 48 per cent of the population (see www.mopw.gov.pk/PopulationDynamicsByProvince.aspx) — are generally low in the hierarchy of power, and their rights to education, health care and proper nutrition are largely denied. Thus, owing to a lack of awareness on the part of both rights-holders and duty bearers, access to sexual and reproductive health information remains limited. This is illustrated by the common occurrence of early marriages, early pregnancies, induced abortions and high maternal and infant mortality ratios. In addition, the absence of women-friendly policies and legislation and the poor implementation of existing laws leads to increased violence and low protection of women and adolescent girls, especially with regard to their sexual and reproductive health and rights. Similarly, complex sociocultural beliefs and practices prevent women from participating in economic activities and being financially independent.

Empowerment of women is an extremely complex, multidimensional and emerging concept within the sphere of development. Empowerment appears to be context-specific and has multiple determinants that include economic, political, social, cultural, religious, personal, psychological and emotional elements. According to "Women's empowerment in Pakistan, a scoping study" by the Gender Equity Program of Aurat Foundation, empowerment is believed to be the road to women's own equality, rights and fulfilment, while the instrumental view regards women's empowerment as the means to a better family, economy, society and nation.

The women of Pakistan are not an invisible group. It is a general perception that the women of Pakistan are confined to their houses, but this is not the case, particularly in the urban parts of the country, where more women are prominent in various fields. The President of Pakistan has appointed the first female Governor of the State Bank of Pakistan. Two women doctors of the Pakistan Army have also risen to the rank of Major General.

There remains, however, a noticeable difference between the lives of women in urban and in rural areas. Rural women account for the majority of the female population of Pakistan, but they lack adequate empowerment. While most women in urban centres can now attain an education ranging from basic to master's level, women in rural areas are still struggling to reach the secondary level of education. They are also victims of inhumane customs and laws, such as karo kari (honour killing) and marriage to the Koran to keep property from being transferred outside the family. They are subjected to discrimination on the basis of their gender, and they also suffer from financial discrimination and are considered an economic burden.

The empowerment of rural women will see them as agents of social and economic change in society.

The foremost condition of women's empowerment is education. It is vital to understand that, for sustainable development, improving the situation of adolescent girls is both a goal in itself as well as an instrument in reaching other goals.

particularly those of gender equality, child mortality, maternal health and HIV/AIDS. Adolescent girls need to be taught about their social and reproductive health and rights, which is the key to discouraging inhumane practices in society, such as sexual and gender-based violence. According to "Age of marriage: a position paper" by Mumtaz, Waraich and Imam, there is a proven positive correlation between education, age of marriage and reproductive health behaviour. Women with higher education enter marriage later, have their first conception later and are 10 times less likely to start early childbearing than women with secondary education. When women are educated, their use of contraceptives increases and their knowledge of HIV/AIDS and its prevention is higher. Education will bring about social empowerment of women.

The involvement of women in the political process, whether as voters, political party workers or political candidates will be a significant step towards the social empowerment of women. Currently in Pakistan, 33 per cent of the seats in all local legislative bodies and 17 per cent of the seats in the constituent assembly at the national level are reserved for women. Although these are welcome initiatives, much still needs to be done to bring about political empowerment. Awareness-raising is needed to inform women of their political rights and the significance of participating in the electoral process. Training in capacity-building has to be conducted for women candidates who want to run for office.

The other significant effort towards women's empowerment is through economic empowerment. A major obstacle is the infringement of a woman's right to own land. Owing to cultural practices, generally land is owned by men or, where the woman is the legal owner, the actual control of the land is retained by her male relative. Enforcing women's land and property rights, with the effective ownership and control of their land, will ensure that women's voices within the household and at the community level will carry weight.

Women in rural areas perform a number of functions outside of the household, including participating in agricultural operations such as harvesting, threshing and looking after farm animals. Although female participation in such activities is very significant, it has never been accounted for in terms of economic benefits. Where remuneration is given for these activities, it is generally paid to a male member of the family.

In other sectors of paid employment, women face adverse working conditions ranging from harassment to being paid less for the same job as their male counterparts. Frequently, women are not registered as employees and cannot benefit from labour laws. Women who are home-based workers are frequently exploited because of their lack of knowledge of the market and are paid very poorly for their hard work.

It is encouraging to note that an enabling policy environment has been created by the Government of Pakistan. The Government of Pakistan has introduced a poverty alleviation programme, "Benazir Income Support Programme". This programme focuses on the women of poor families, who are given cash assistance on a monthly basis. This is direct disbursement of assistance to poor women at their doorsteps. The primary objective is to enhance women's participation and establish their authority in decision-making at home, to manage resources and be self-reliant.

Another objective is to assist women in breaking the cycle of poverty through the provision of interest-free financial assistance. This step would enable selected families to initiate businesses and pursue entrepreneurship; it is designed to promote self-employment among women beneficiaries to improve their livelihood.

A secondary objective of the programme is to register women with the National Database and Registration Authority and provide them with national identity cards. Further avenues of empowerment are opened to those who possess national identity cards, such as microfinance facilities and the ability to vote in the political process.

The low socio-economic status of women means that they have limited access to health-care services. The availability, accessibility and quality of basic health services are of a poor standard in rural areas. This is compounded by the fact that health matters receive less than 1 per cent of gross domestic product, according to "Women's empowerment in Pakistan". The lack of female doctors, paired with the limited mobility of women, also restricts women's access to health-care services. This in turn has a severe impact on the maternal mortality ratio, which is 260 deaths per 100,000 live births, and infant mortality ratio, which is 89 deaths per 1,000 live births, according to the United Nations Population Fund report "The state of the world's midwifery 2011".

Pakistan is a signatory to the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, and its obligations under the Platform for Action include empowerment of women. The current situation, as reflected above, requires that Pakistan adopt a number of pro-women policies to empower rural women and fulfil its obligations under the Platform for Action.

Pakistan also adopted the United Nations Millennium Declaration in 2000. In order to meet the Millennium Development Goals, greater emphasis on economic empowerment is essential through extensive policies that help poor people break the cycle of poverty. Similarly, health-care services have to be improved to enhance the sexual and reproductive health of rural women.

Investment in education must be a main priority in Pakistan. Furthermore, contextualized comprehensive sexuality education and reproductive health education must be part of the national education curriculum, which would lead to empowered adolescent girls. This in turn will ensure the fulfilment of the obligation of Pakistan under the International Conference on Population and Development Programme of Action and enormous progress towards achieving Millennium Development Goal 2.